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Sustainable consumption in national context: an introduction to the special issue

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International institutions over the past decade have begun to emphasize the need to reduce the environmental impacts of heavily consumerist lifestyles in affluent nations as a precondition for sustainable development. Originally outlined in Agenda 21, and discussed at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, sustainable consumption has now emerged as a definable domain of global environmental politics. At the level of high environmental politics, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) have played key roles in reframing environmental deterioration as a consumption problem, rather than a production problem. However, within specific national contexts policymakers and social activists are seeking to engage with the difficult conceptual and political dilemmas posed by contemporary modes of material provisioning. This introductory overview highlights the historical background on the nascent issue of sustainable consumption and summarizes the three comparative case studies that follow: the Netherlands, France, and the United States. The experiences of these countries suggest that the concept of sustainable consumption is quite malleable, and its practical application is shaped by the political culture and policy styles of specific national contexts.

KEYWORDS: sustainabile consumption, environmental impact, international agreements, politics, environmental policy, cultural values, case studies

Introduction

The common assessment, rendered even before the formal proceedings began, was that the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg was a dismal failure. It is true that this desultory follow-up to the carefully scripted jamboree held in Rio ten years earlier did not climax any monumental agreements. However, with the passage of time, the conference in South Africa may come to be seen as a strategic turning point. One of the most significant outcomes of the so-called Rio+10 gathering was the decision enjoining the international community—and more specifically wealthy nations—to redouble their attention during the coming decade on the environmental costs, economic inequity, and social malaise associated with heavily consumerist lifestyles.

This commitment, if it proves durable, represents a policy realignment of historic proportions. After all, for the past thirty years, international institutions (and national governments) have actively underplayed the role of material and energy consumption as a source of unsustainable patterns of development and failed to recognize consumers as serious interlocutors in policy design and implementation. Although prominent reports, such as *Limits to Growth*, stressed the implications of unprecedented volumes of resource throughput, they did not conceptualize consumers as purposeful actors. Implicit in these treatments was the notion that shopping—necessary though it might be—was a sordid activity, one aggravated by the cunning ploys of unscrupulous marketers, who goaded hapless consumers to buy a seemingly endless arsenal of frivolous products.

Absent a well-founded understanding of consumer motivation, it is not surprising that the producers (as opposed to the consumers) of goods became the targets of regulatory scrutiny. From the earliest days of the modern environmental era during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the common wisdom has been that air pollution, toxic waste, and so forth are the unfortunate outcomes of

producers' failure to internalize a sense of proper stewardship. Policy makers formulated a variety of measures—ranging from the heavily punitive to the vaguely voluntary—to encourage a more resolute commitment and to adapt the system of incentives guiding managerial decisions.

We can trace this sweeping dismissal of consumers—as both intermediaries and end users—to three root causes. First, policymakers typically regard individual consumption as a sovereign domain and, as such, beyond the legitimate reach of public intervention. To be sure, the protective shell around material acquisition is not impervious and the regulation of consumption sometimes occurs. Alcohol, tobacco, and firearms, for instance, are notable consumer goods that most societies subject to heavy controls. Indeed, in many instances, governments have learned how to turn the oversight of these goods into important revenue sources, a dynamic that creates a whole set of issues beyond the scope of this discussion. Nonetheless, in most affluent countries, neo-liberal thinking cautions against using public policy to unduly manage consumer decisionmaking.

Second, governmental legitimacy is heavily grounded in the need to perpetuate economic growth and to ensure steady expansion of the domestic economy (see, for example, Dryzek *et al*, 2003). While it may be appropriate to dampen consumption during inflationary periods, or to discourage a ballooning trade deficit, the general rule is that a little consumption is good, but more is better. To the dominant cast of mind, a purposeful effort to alter—or more pointedly to discourage—consumption seems quite silly.

Finally, it is an article of faith among most policymakers that consumers have insufficient technical expertise about the social and environmental implications of their decisions. The necessary knowledge and institutional capacity to ameliorate consumption's untoward effects are understood to reside in the engineering departments of major corporations. Such thinking conveniently conflates with the vilified portrait of large industrial firms painted by many environmentalist and consumer advocacy organizations, and it reinforces regulatory ideas such as the polluter-pays principle. In other words, the obligation to promote social and environmental responsibility is most appropriately assigned to producers because their irresponsible actions create the problems in the first place.

For these reasons, political debate has not traditionally considered material consumption; instead we have devoted ourselves to fostering technological innovations aimed at incremental environmental improvements—or at least preventing further deterioration in the face of ever-expanding economic growth. The preparatory meetings to the Rio conference, however, showed the contradictions of this approach. Negotiations during the prior decade to forge a global response to ozone depletion, and the emergence of climate change as a fiercely contested arena, brought into bold relief the wealthy nations' culpability (Cohen, 2001). Following these proceedings, most industrialized countries continued to sidestep the problem. However, a handful of national governments and secondary policy-making bodies began to devote attention to the untoward consequences of consumer practices. In particular, the Nordic countries convened a series of symposia on the environmental implications of consumption, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) launched work programs around this theme. This joining up of activities created a platform for sustainable consumption and contributed to the issue's relatively high visibility at Johannesburg.

The next section of this introduction reviews the emergence of sustainable consumption as a definable area of international environmental politics and the role of these various institutions. We then engage in a comparative study of how sustainable consumption has conceptually evolved in three national settings: the Netherlands, France, and the United States. This investigation points to the absence of a uniform strategy. Because of impinging political prerogatives, historical predeterminants, and cultural orientations, sustainable consumption is being differently framed in each of these nations. The current debate over the efficacy of managing consumer decisionmaking provides an opportunity to assess the program's conceptual status and to consider the intersection between cultural and environmental politics in these three settings.

Agenda 21 and Sustainable Consumption

Although some of the discussion at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm—most notably by Indira Gandhi—showcased material consumption in affluent countries, the issue failed to galvanize robust international attention. Such a politically volatile agenda was deemed impolite and, more to the point, threatened an emerging consensus about the need for a largely technical ensemble of environmental management strategies. Critical scrutiny of the global North's resource-intensive lifestyles was effectively prohibited until the preparatory meetings convened to work out the details of Agenda 21 and Rio's other centerpiece documents.

Two major drivers were responsible for reintroducing consumption during these organizational activities. The first, the 1987 Montreal Protocol, gave new prominence to global environmental problems. Forerunner countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sought to use the momentum generated by the ozone accord to press an ambitious future vision. A second factor was the palpable suspicion among developing nations about the underlying intentions of global environmentalism. Concerns about how widening production controls would affect their economic prospects caused poorer countries to charge that wealthier countries needed to make painful economic adjustments. These initiatives encountered their stiffest resistance in the fourth chapter of Agenda 21, which considers the relationship between material consumption and sustainable development.

A broad coalition of affluent countries, led by the United States, was loath to include any substantive treatment of the environmental implications of consumption. However, developing countries insisted on

broadening the list of factors that contributed to global ecological deterioration beyond the obligatory reference to population growth. Proponents of this perspective drew attention to developed nations' outsized greenhouse gas emissions and rates of natural resource appropriation. Using ecological footprint analysis, developing countries demonstrated that their contribution to climate change and other large-scale ecological problems was, on a per capita basis, trifling by comparison to the voracious appetites of their prosperous counterparts.

For three decades, the conventional view had indisputably ascribed environmental decline to poverty and unbridled population growth in the global South. Affluent nations interpreted this assault by China, India, and others as disparaging affluence, and they aggressively resisted this reassignment of responsibility. Under these circumstances, negotiators preparing for the Earth Summit had profound difficulty completing their work and, in the end, left unresolved the thorniest questions. Nonetheless, Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 does advance the view that "the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances." Sustainable consumption was also given prominent attention in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, where Principle 8 encourages the signatories to "reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption."

To be sure, the controversies that burst into the open during the lead-up to Rio had been fomented elsewhere. For instance, the Brundtland Commission chided the industrialized countries for the "short-sighted way in which we have often pursued prosperity" and envisaged that "major changes in policies will be needed to cope with the industrial world's high levels of consumption" (WCED 1987). The European Commission, during this same timeframe, was formulating its Fifth Environmental Action Programme and similar contentions animated its deliberations. Several novel initiatives by national governments—most significantly the Netherlands' National Environmental Policy Plan—sought to shift some environmental policymaking attention to consumers (van der Straaten, 1992; Bennett, 1991). As a result, by the time the heads of state assembled in Rio, sustainable consumption had already made substantial headway in its steady climb onto the global policy agenda.

Sustainable Consumption During the Post-Rio Period

In the immediate aftermath of the contentious battles over Agenda 21, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment organized a series of workshops to assuage international tensions. The intent of these conferences was to gather together representatives of the affluent nations as part of a process of forging a shared definition of sustainable consumption and to formulate a common strategy for addressing the issue. Because of the difficulties of devising a politically satisfactory approach regarding the implications of

consumers' decisionmaking, consumption was initially subsumed by the broader, more anodyne rubric of "sustainable production and consumption." This tactical move made it possible to give a passing glance to consumers, while conveniently maintaining allegiance to more familiar strategies that emphasized producers. The result was that eco-efficiency, clean production, and other managerial approaches designed to harmonize economic and environmental objectives received heavy attention during the early 1990s, and sustainable consumption temporarily disappeared from view. In the minds of most policymakers, sustainable consumption—to the extent that it was not simply a subset of sustainable production— would be advanced using product labeling schemes along the lines of the Nordic countries' Blue Swan and Germany's Blue Angel.

The OECD is responsible for rescuing consumption from a production-dominated policy approach (see, for example, OECD, 1998). Following the Earth Summit, the Environment Directorate of the Paris-based organization launched, in close collaboration with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), a work program on sustainable production and consumption. By the mid-1990s, particularly within northern Europe, a menu of production-dominated approaches to enhance the transparency of firms' environmental performance—for example, ISO 14001— had begun to gain popular acceptance. The OECD's challenge was to develop intellectual space for consumption considerations that was separable and distinct from conventional environmental policy categories.

Numerous sources supported this effort. For instance, a joint committee of the Royal Society of London and the United States National Academy of Sciences (1997) issued an unprecedented report on the environmental implications of consumerism. Departing from customary dispassionate technical prescriptions, this document noted that "consumption patterns of the richer countries may have to change; and for global patterns of consumption to be sustainable, they must change." At the same time, a handful of European governments, riding a wave of public environmental concern during the mid- and late-1990s, issued a flurry of consultation reports that gave consumption surprisingly high prominence. For example, in 1998 the United Kingdom released *Sustainable Development: Opportunities for Change*, stating "to promote . . . more sustainable production and consumption we need to stimulate and support those influences which encourage producers to provide better goods and services while using resources more efficiently." This swelling appreciation for the interactions between consumption and the environment included efforts by national and regional scientific research councils. On the international level, the World Bank devoted the 1998 issue of its *Human Development Report* to sustainable consumption.

Sustainable consumption has also become an area of increasing NGO activity, and the object of several global forums. Groups such as the International Institute for Environment and Development, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, Consumers International, the European Network for Socially Responsible Consumption, and the NGO Caucus for Sustainable Production and Consumption

have contributed a great deal of the intellectual content to these proceedings.

Sustainable Consumption and the United Nations Environment Program

Sustainable consumption, in many respects, is the most obdurate challenge of the sustainable development agenda, and the OECD has provided an important context for working through the numerous conceptual and political dilemmas (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000). However, UNEP's current interest in sustainable consumption may be much more consequential over the long term. Launched in 1998, UNEP's sustainable consumption efforts are housed within the Division of Technology, Industry, and Economics (DTIE), and officials seek to engage a range of stakeholders—businesses, governments, and NGOs—in developing strategies to promote environmentally responsible consumption. While UNEP's activities to date have primarily concentrated on the dissemination of information and the creation of a global network, the organization's multidimensional plan of action is becoming more proactive (Marras, 2003).

First, UNEP has sought to engage the advertising and communication industries in pursuing sustainable consumption practices. This initiative is attempting to draw marketing professionals into a dialogue and to highlight green consumerism for future expansion. UNEP is currently working with the European Association of Communication Agencies, the World Federation of Advertisers, and the World Association of Opinion and Marketing Research Professionals. Prominent firms—for example McCann Erickson—have even collaborated with UNEP on specific projects.

Second, in partnership with the Society for Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC), UNEP has launched a program promoting life-cycle analysis to evaluate products' environmental impacts over the full span of their lives—conventionally viewed as design, construction, use, and disposal. This initiative rose out of the 2000 Malmö Declaration, and it received added impetus two years later during the proceedings at Johannesburg. It is also building upon European legislation to force product designers to focus on integrated product policies (Rubik, 2001; Rubik and Scholl, 2002; see also Reinhard, 2003).

Third, a related UNEP work program seeks to move the field of environmental management in a more holistic direction and to inspire innovative modes of policymaking that are not simply oriented around pollution remediation. Environmental policies have customarily concentrated on specific product or process attributes, instead of the system features in which these activities take place. A key motivation behind emergent fields such as ecological design and industrial ecology is the need to construct new consumption (and production) systems that emphasize services instead of material throughput—for example, personal mobility instead of widespread private vehicle ownership (Allenby, 1999).

Fourth, UNEP has recognized the primacy of youth consumption and has been working to engage people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four in public discussions regarding the environmental impacts of their lifestyles. Conducted in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the youthXchange program rejects the prior generation of environmentalist thinking that maligned consumers for their anti-ecological sensibilities. Instead, the point of departure is an awareness that "youth behavior is a mix of cynicism and idealism, of hedonism and the desire to do the right thing. Any communication effort that intends to promote sustainable consumption among youth has to start from these contradictions" (UNEP, 2004). Accordingly, the project recognizes the important role that global brands and peer pressure play in the lives of young consumers, and attempts to use product loyalty to encourage commitments to sustainable development and human rights.

Finally, UNEP is working with professional procurement societies to foster information exchange about the environmental dimensions of institutional procurement and to develop an international system of consistent standards. This activity is actually supporting a quiet revolution in the organizational acquisition of goods and services. Started initially to encourage governmental entities and publicly visible corporations to buy paper with recycled content and fuel-efficient fleet vehicles, so-called "sustainable procurement" now uses the purchasing expertise and budgets of large institutions to encourage more environmentally attentive consumption (Mastny, 2003).

Sustainable Consumption at Johannesburg and Beyond

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg was destined from the start to be a sobering affair. Commitment to the grand ideals of sustainable development prominent in Rio ten years earlier had dissipated, and conference organizers had only a few shop-worn successes to profile. Moreover, the strategic decision to assign lead responsibility for sustainable development to national governments had come under a hail of criticism. During the Earth Summit's aftermath, only a handful of forerunner countries had bothered to formulate national sustainability plans (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000). It has been far more common for political leaders to express token support for sustainable development, but then to step back when difficult decisions challenged prevailing priorities.

Because of this diffident record, sustainable development proponents were under tremendous pressure to demonstrate unambiguous resolve for Agenda 21, originally agreed to at Rio. As part of its effort to reenergize global support for sustainable development, the WSSD Plan of Implementation advanced three "overarching" objectives: eradicating poverty, changing unsustainable production and consumption patterns, and protecting and managing natural resources. With respect to sustainable consumption, the document asserts that

> Fundamental changes in the way societies
> produce and consume are indispensable for

achieving global sustainable development. All countries should promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, with the developed countries taking the lead and with all countries benefiting from the process . . . Governments, relevant international organizations, the private sector, and all major groups should play an active role in changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns.

The plan proceeds to delineate, in an ambitious level of detail, the need to promote technological development, to encourage transparency, to eliminate market distortions, and so forth. To advance this program, WSSD conferees charged UNEP (and UNCSD) with developing a ten-year framework for action on sustainable consumption. This charge will inevitably raise not only the issue's international visibility, but the stakes for global environmental institutions.

Sustainable Consumption in National Context

Despite sustainable consumption's growing profile within international environmental politics, the concept does not engender uniform understanding across different national settings. This is perhaps unsurprising. After all, political culture is a key variable of state intervention, and countries approach policy issues with characteristic styles. The foundational research for this observation was conducted during the 1950s and 1960s, and scholars interested in comparative environmental policy have regularly drawn on these insights (see, for example, Enloe, 1975; Lundqvist, 1980; Richardson, 1982; Vogel, 1986).

During the past decade, due largely to the European Union's expanding role, this work has taken on a new relevance (Wallace, 1995; Christiansen, 1996; Skou Andersen and Liefferink, 1997; Jänicke and Weidner, 1997; Hanf and Jansen, 1998; Binder, Jänicke, and Petschow, 2001). In particular, Martin Jänicke's studies of institutional capacity has shaped the overall research trajectory, but other important perspectives have also developed out of investigations into the cultural foundations of environmental policy-making systems (Jasanoff, 1986; Wynne, 1987; Jamison and Baark, 1999; Smith and Phillips, 2000). Also significant has been research in the related area of comparative technology policy that has sought to assess the varying ways that countries approach innovation (for an overview see Nelson, 1993). The most recent wave of work within this tradition has sought to contrast the policy styles shaping efforts to encourage sustainable development, to catalyze processes of ecological modernization, to formulate green plans, and to adjust to a future shaped by climate change (see, for example, O'Riordan and Jäger, 1996; Baker *et al*, 1997; Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998; Sonnenfeld and Mol, 2000; Dalal-Clayton, 1996).

The studies that comprise this premier issue of *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy* build on this tradition by examining how a cross section of affluent countries is currently responding to the challenges posed by

sustainable consumption. While most discourse on the need to modulate consumerism has been framed at the international level, national governments, at least for the foreseeable future, will be responsible for implementing policy programs.

This collection examines the pursuit of sustainable consumption as a policy issue in three countries: the Netherlands, France, and the United States. The contributors examine, from a comparative standpoint, the rhetorical debates surrounding sustainable consumption, as well as the actual policy tools and techniques being formulated to achieve its objectives. While these studies focus primarily on the institutional and administrative features of sustainable consumption in specific national contexts, the collection also highlights more generally the national policy styles of the respective countries.

There has to date been very little investigation of how sustainable consumption is being assimilated as a policy concept. The prevailing tendency has instead been to examine, from an apolitical perspective, a handful of technical devices, such as ecological taxation and eco-labeling, and to assess the potential of these approaches for "greening" consumer behavior. These economic and informational campaigns certainly have a role in any serious effort to transform contemporary consumerism. However, the seemingly intractable qualities of the "consumption problem" create a need to approach the issue more creatively and to link up with other political objectives. The following studies seek to shed light on these efforts to widen the audience for discussions of sustainable consumption.

The first study examines the Netherlands, which, by most assessments, occupies a leadership position in international environmental affairs. Over the past two decades, the country has managed to leverage its relatively small size and its moral reputation to advance a progressive environmental agenda. One of the first countries to recognize the inadequacies of a rigid environmental policy framework, as early as the mid-1980s the Netherlands released a series of multi-year planning reports—or National Environmental Policy Plans—to move toward an adaptive system predicated upon formidable targets and integrated management. Ever since, the Dutch have arguably been at the forefront in developing substantive programs to manage the adverse environmental impacts of material consumption.

The article by Susan Martens and Gert Spaargaren describes the political dynamics underlying the Netherlands' leading role and documents its experience in fostering sustainable practices among Dutch consumers. This policy program shares many elements with a broader commitment to ecological modernization. Originally formulated in the context of production to enhance the environmental efficiency of certain manufacturing operations, the concept has also been applied to consumer decisionmaking. In the Dutch case, the need to cultivate new forms of consumption has not been the exclusive province of environmental officials. Rather, a much larger range of policy perspectives has been brought to bear on the tenacious dilemmas associated with environmentally significant consumption and nearly the entire array of ministerial portfolios in the Netherlands has contributed to

this effort in some capacity. While sustainable consumption has achieved a high level of political legitimacy, its proponents continue to encounter significant resistance, and the various initiatives launched to date evince mixed success. Nonetheless, regarding the practical mechanics of shifting practices, the Netherlands has committed itself to a notable process of social learning, and Dutch policymakers have begun to accumulate valuable experience.

The second contribution examines the status of sustainable consumption in France. While material provisioning occupies a storied historical position in the country's cultural politics, its environmental dimensions have not received prominent attention. Indeed, environmentalism as a political voice has struggled in France, and the government has been slow to respond to pressure for environmental reform. Measured against its European and international counterparts, France is regarded by most informed observers as an environmental laggard or, at best, a reluctant partaker.

Samy Sanches, however, demonstrates that if one adopts a broad interpretation, over the past decade a highly animated politics has developed in France around sustainable consumption. Motivated in large part by a desire to preserve cultural autonomy in the face of globalization, French political leaders have latched onto several themes entirely consistent with sustainable consumption. Furthermore, the French public has begun to join up their concerns about consumerism, working hours, domesticity, leisure, and so forth. The political debate spurring the 1998 decision to reduce the French workweek to 35 hours has fostered a civic consciousness about the virtue of more sustainable livelihoods.

The third, and final, study considers sustainable consumption in the United States. Given the very modest attention that American political leaders and policymakers have devoted to the notion of sustainability, inclusion of the country in a review of sustainable consumption may strike some readers as a bit curious. To be sure, uptake of the Rio commitments in the United States has been poor, and active consideration of consumerism's adverse environmental impacts does not garner much formal political interest. Nonetheless, many parts of the country have surprisingly vibrant grassroots activity aimed at resisting and reforming mainstream consumption practices. Sizable bands of anti-consumerism activists, anti-television protesters, advertising opponents, voluntary simplifiers, green consumers, and others have begun to coalesce around an agenda broadly consistent with sustainable consumption, although not organized under such a rubric.

The American political system, hamstrung by a complex division of power among different branches of government, a deep commitment to partisanship, and a sclerotic two-party setup, has rarely evinced proactive domestic policymaking. The historical pattern demonstrates that change at the national level only occurs as the outcome of a combination of untiring local agitation and demonstrable action by a critical mass of individual states. My article highlights how this process is again playing itself out in the case of sustainable consumption. Although it is too early to determine whether these inchoate activities will coalesce into a meaningful social and political movement, a growing number of Americans appear discontented with prevailing consumption.

Viewed in the round, these three studies point to an emerging disconnect between the highly rationalistic international notions of sustainable consumption and that developing in specific national contexts. At the global level, efforts to transform consumerist lifestyles are largely rooted in technical debates about the relative merits of economic and informational tools. In contrast, closer to the ground, sustainable consumption is becoming fused with other public concerns about the consequences of consumerism. Much of this activity is not joined up with the high politics of sustainable consumption, but rather is driven by diverse social objectives that can range from insulating children from the impacts of television to protecting cultural resources jeopardized by globalization. This appropriation process suggests that the pursuit of sustainable consumption will become a flexible endeavor, one that sympathetic policymakers and issue promoters will adapt to the opportunities and constraints of specific national contexts.

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